



*Together Effectively Achieving Multiculturalism*

# **Diversity Trailblazer Awards 2009**



October 9, 2009

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**CONTACT:**

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Chair, TEAM Westport  
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**TEAM Westport invites entire community to honor Venora Ellis, Joan Schine and Tracy Sugarman on October 18**

Westport's official committee on multiculturalism and diversity will present "Diversity Trailblazer" Awards from the Town of Westport to three lifelong pioneers in the pursuit of rights for everyone.

Ann Sheffer and Bill Scheffler will host the ceremony and celebratory reception at their home at 17 Stony Point Road in Westport on Sunday, October 18, 2009 from 3 pm to 5 pm, with the awards scheduled for presentation at 4 pm. Historical perspectives on Westport and the lives of the honorees will be presented by Woody Klein and Dan Woog. The event is free and open to the public, who should RSVP by October 16 to info@teamwestport.org or 203-227-9671.

"We invite the entire community to join us as we celebrate the lifelong impact of three people who have been transformational in shaping the reality and reputation of Westport for diversity," said TEAM Westport committee chair Harold Bailey, Jr. "Thanks in great part to their efforts, Westport today is a more welcoming community for all people."

In her 68 years as a businesswoman and citizen of Westport, Venora Ellis challenged traditional social mores and shattered racial barriers by action and example. For much of her last 40 years in Westport, she and her late husband Leroy were also instrumental in attracting a number of citizens of color to live in Westport.

Joan Schine is being honored for the lasting impact of her challenging and ultimately successful struggle to establish Project Concern in Westport. Combined with her subsequent work on improving children's education, she has helped transform our community and the lives of Connecticut's children.

Using his art, writing and film-making, Tracy Sugarman has helped alter the attitude and understanding of millions of Americans toward race and diversity. Through his personal engagement as a lecturer and role model in our schools, he has had a profound impact on our children



*The Friends of TEAM Westport  
Invite You to Join Us at Our  
Diversity Trailblazer Awards Reception  
Honoring Lifelong Pioneers  
In the Pursuit of Rights for Everyone*

*Venora Ellis  
Joan Schine  
Tracy Sugarman*

*At the home of  
Ann Sheffer and Bill Scheffler  
17 Ston(e)y Point Road  
Westport, CT*

*On Sunday, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
3 – 5 PM  
(Award Program Begins at 4 PM)*

*RSVP: 203.227.9671  
or  
info@teamwestport.org*



The *Friends of TEAM Westport* are pleased to recognize these three Westport citizens for their contributions and dedication to diversity at a time when it was not as common.

*Venora Ellis  
Community Activist and Advocate*

*Joan Schine  
Former Chairwoman of the Westport Board of Education*

*Tracy Sugarman  
Artist and Author*

**Reception Committee**

Ann Sheffer, Honorary Chair  
Bernicestine McLeod Bailey\*  
Harold Bailey, Jr.\*  
Barbara Butler\*  
Judy Hamer\*  
Susan Killian\*  
Woody Klein  
Catherine Onyemelukwe\*  
Al Puchala\*  
Nick Rudd\*  
Dan Woog

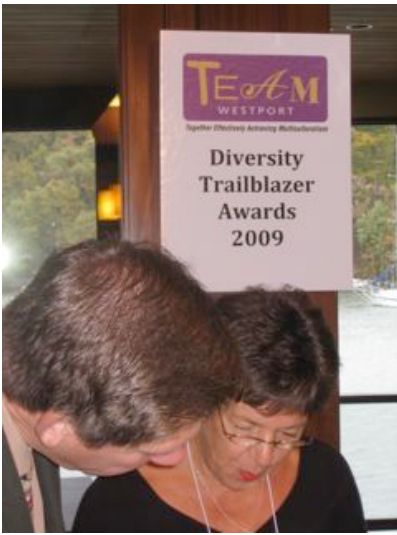
\*Member of TEAM Westport

**TEAM Westport Members**

Steve Daniels  
Stephane Kirven  
Glenn Lau-Kee  
David Levinson  
Stu Losen  
Amy Lin Meyerson  
Dolores Paoli

Ex Officio  
Gordon Joseloff  
Shelly Kassen

Come learn more about *Friends of TEAM Westport*, a 501(c)(3) organization based in Westport, CT, whose mission is to achieve, celebrate, and extend diversity.





*Westport News columnist and former TEAM Westport member Dan Woog salutes Venora Ellis.*

"Venora Ellis came to Westport from Mississippi in 1938. A dean at Tougaloo College in Mississippi told her there was work here as a "mother's helper." She liked the area, returned every summer, and in 1942 came north to stay.

"Race relations were as hard to define here as down South. There was a bustling black enclave off Main Street, where Bobby Q's restaurant is now. In the 1940s and '50s that section held a church, barbershop and nightclub. One night, it burned to the ground. The cause was never determined, and most residents never returned.

"Venora Ellis opened a house couturier business. For 42 years, she dressed homes.

In 1952 she married Leroy Ellis, whom she had known at Tougaloo and who then went on to play music at Harlem's Apollo Theater. He ran a home and industrial cleaning service. Every Memorial Day, he sang at the ceremony.

"The Ellises lived on Jennie Lane, and bought an investment property on Gorham Avenue.

They were active in town affairs. Venora joined PTAs, chaired the Experiment in International Living, served on housing and human services committees, assisted the Senior Center, chaired the Bicentennial Ball, was an active participant in Brown Bag luncheons, and was a docent at Martha Stewart's Long Lots Road house.

"She also helped found the Intercommunity Camp, which brought together youngsters from Westport, Weston, Norwalk and Bridgeport. It was a pioneering effort, and she helped make it a success.

"Life was not always easy. Storeowners on Main Street sometimes looked at her with suspicion – while, she said, white teenagers were stealing whatever they could. Her two daughters were occasionally taunted. Venora Ellis told them to respond: "You spend all your time at the beach trying to get tan. What's the difference?"

"After 64 years in Westport, Venora Ellis moved to Pennsylvania, to live near her daughter.

Before she moved, AJ Izzo of Crossroads Hardware called her "The Mayor of Gorham."

Also before she moved, Venora Ellis reflected on her time in Westport. 'I've enjoyed this town so much,' she said. 'It's given me a lot – spiritually, culturally, educationally, business-wise. But I'm 87, you know. It's time to move on.'

"Venora Ellis moved away, physically. But her mark on Westport can never be erased."

## TEAM Westport



Recognizes

**Venora Ellis**

As A

**Diversity Trailblazer**

*As a successful businesswoman and citizen of Westport her keen insight, winning style and can-do attitude challenged social mores and helped shatter racial barriers one at a time for decades in the Town of Westport. She and her husband Leroy served as 'storybook' role models who helped establish an emerging black middle and upper class community within Westport.*

Dated this 18<sup>th</sup> Day of October 2009

Gordon Joseloff

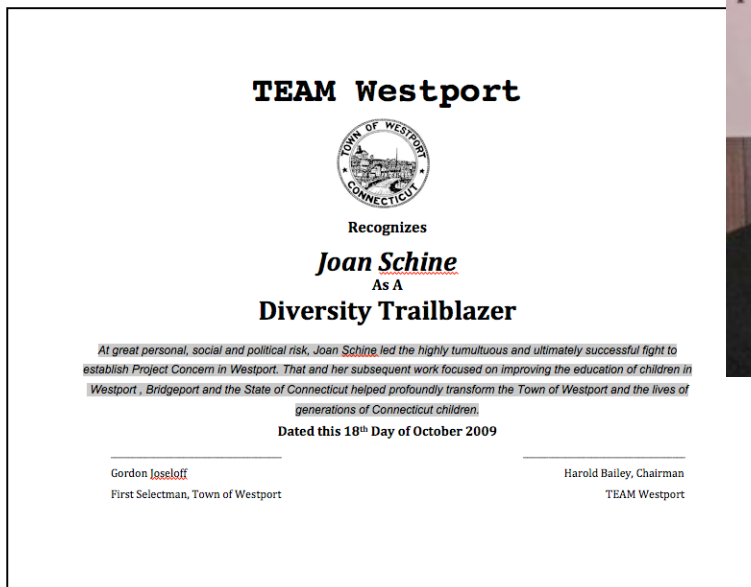
First Selectman, Town of Westport

Harold Bailey, Chairman

TEAM Westport



*(L-R) First Selectman Gordon Joseloff and TEAM Westport Chair Harold Bailey present the Diversity Trailblazer certificate.*



*(L-R) First Selectman Gordon Joseloff and TEAM Westport Chair Harold Bailey present the Diversity Trailblazer certificate.*



*Westport News columnist and former TEAM Westport member Dan Woog salutes Joan Schine.*

"Thanks to Woody Klein for much of the following information:

"In May 1968, more than 1000 Westporters gathered to attend a meeting of various boards and commissions to decide whether or not to open up Westport's summer school and beach school programs to a group of 25 to 40 black and Hispanic children for 6 weeks. Following tense and heated debate, both the Recreation and Education boards unanimously approved the program.

"Lou Nistico – owner of the Arrow Restaurant, chairman of the Recreation Commission, and an imposing figure at over 300 pounds, was a strong voice in favor of bringing the Bridgeport children to Westport. So too was a much tinier woman, who was nonetheless as powerful as Lou Nistico: Joan Schine, the diminutive chairman of the Board of Education.

"That debate led, two years later, to an even more volatile event. In April 1970, the Board of Ed met to discuss Project Concern. The plan was to bus a limited number of Bridgeport children to Westport schools. Once again, 1000 residents turned out for the meeting. For eight months, Project Concern consumed Westport. The debate was vicious. Finally, in December 1970, the Board of Ed voted 3-2 to bus a limited number of Bridgeport students into Westport schools.

"Less than 48 hours later, thousands of letters were sent to Westport residents urging the recall of Joan Schine, the Board of Ed chairman. The charge was that she acted 'against the interests and desires of the people of Westport.'

"An ugly episode ensued. Joan Schine received death threats and harassing phone calls. The FBI was called in. But she was defended by a bipartisan group, including Republican Allen Raymond. They argued that democracy was on trial in Westport. Despite appeals that reached the state Supreme Court, the 3-2 vote held. In 1971 Project Concern began, and for a decade it was an important part of the Westport school system.

"When Joan Schine left the Board of Education, she said, 'For six years, second only to my family, the schools have been the central focus of my life, my time, my thought and my energies. I have no regrets that this has been so.'

"Joan Schine received the Woman of Valor Award from a New York group. But just as meaningful was a note she received from Lou Nistico. It read: 'You are a lighthouse shining through a dense fog. You stand tall, kind, intelligent, dignified, compassionate, honest. For this I kiss you on both cheeks.'

"Joan's son Robert said: 'She knew she was doing something socially necessary. She was not going to be deflected from that goal.' In fact, for years Joan Schine had worked for all youngsters. She moved to Westport in 1956, and with four children in the Westport schools, quickly got involved with the PTA. Her commitment was in her genes: Her father had been a New York City principal and administrator. From him, she learned of John Dewey's ideal: That an educated citizenry is democracy's greatest resource.

"In 1977 Joan's husband, Harold, died. He was just 54. Having already retired from the Board of Ed, she embarked on a career in the field of service learning. She initiated programs for children, consulted to schools and foundations all over the country, and edited a book on the subject of service learning. She earned a national reputation. But Westporters will always remember her courageous contribution to this town, and to the city of Bridgeport just 10 miles away, nearly four decades ago."



*Westport News columnist Woody Klein salutes Tracy Sugarman.*

"It's a great pleasure to honor a longtime friend. When I update my history of Westport book in the year 3,000, Tracy Sugarman's accomplishments will be in the first chapter. "There's an old saying about a football player who can run, pass, and kick. They call them "Triple Threats." Tracy Sugarman is one of those rare "Triple Threats" in the world of literature, art, and civil rights. He is in a league of his own. He writes about events, illustrates them, and participates in them. He is no "arm-chair liberal." He goes to wherever the action is—and he always makes a difference! His talents as a writer and illustrator are among the best in America. His role as an activist is a model for everyone to follow.

"Tracy is an illustrator and writer who has lived and worked as an activist in Westport since 1950. For 60 years he has been a reportorial artist chronicling life in the United States. His drawings of World War II and the civil rights struggle in the South have been acquired by the U.S. Library of Congress and were published in The New York Times, the Saturday Evening Post, and by the United States Information Agency for its magazines in Europe, Asia, and South America. He even illustrated a story for Think Magazine, IBM's international magazine that is read in 160 countries. I know that for a fact. I had the pleasure of giving him the assignment when I was editor of that publication! "Here in Westport, since 1950, Tracy has supported and participated in all efforts in this community to foster diversity. "It's been mostly because I feel that our young people, the only change agents I know, are being cheated by the limited vision of a very homogeneous community," he told me.

"As a parent it led him and his family to join with many Westporters in the March on Washington and to support efforts like the Intercommunity Camp to bring inner city kids to share our pools and homes and Project Concern, which bused inner city children to share our schools.

"His involvement with the ongoing struggle for full citizenship for black Americans in Mississippi heightened our awareness of the common humanity that binds us together and of the ridiculous barriers on race and ethnicity that are used to separate us.

"Tracy's daughter became active in the inner city of Norwalk and his son worked with SNCC on voting rights in Arkansas while I was working as an art historian for the civil rights movement in the South. His late wife, June, was a community organizer in Mt. Vernon, striving to open opportunities for minorities during the 1970s. The Sugarman home was a nexus for many in the civil rights movement to strengthen support for the continuing struggle, people like Andy Young, Julian Bond, and Annie Lou Hamer.

"In 1969, Tracy and filmmaker Bill Buckley created Rediscovery Productions, the first racially integrated creative team here in Westport. It developed documentaries about the contributions of black Americans to our science, our political process and to our culture.

"For more than forty-five years, Tracy has spoken in Westport schools on every possible occasion to open windows for the kids who are straining to see beyond this community. "Their response is the greatest satisfaction one could receive and the best goad to keep on

keeping on, spreading the gospel of real brotherhood. It's kids that will change the world."

"Tracy has built understanding with the books he has written and illustrated: 'Stranger at the Gates: A Summer in Mississippi,' 'My War: a Love Story in Letters,' 'Drawing Conclusions: an Artist Discovers His America,' and 'We Had Sneakers -They Had Guns: the Kids Who Fought for Civil Rights in Mississippi (2009), done with the help of his well-known journalist wife, Gloria Cole.

"One last thought. As someone who tries to emulate Tracy Sugarman, I must tell you that it is hard to keep up with him. Even when we walk the beach together, I find that his long strides are too much for me. I have to literally run or trot to keep pace. Like a kangaroo, he lopes, rather than walks.

"With that, I say to you, Tracy, when it comes to loping and writing and drawing-- to use one of our your own favorite expressions, may you keep on keeping on! Westport needs you! We all need you."

## TEAM Westport



Recognizes

**Tracy Sugarman**  
As A

**Diversity Trailblazer**

The enormous scope and impact of Tracy's work has helped educate the nation on race and diversity. Through his prolific art, writing and PBS filmmaking with colleague Bill Buckley, Tracy has helped transform the attitude and understanding of generations of Americans nationwide. However, it is his personal dedication and engagement as guest lecturer and role model within our school system that has had a profound impact on Westport's children.

Dated this 18<sup>th</sup> Day of October 2009

Gordon Joseloff  
First Selectman, Town of Westport

Harold Bailey, Chairman  
TEAM Westport



*(L-R) TEAM Westport Chair Harold Bailey, First Selectman Gordon Joseloff, Woody Klein, Tracy Sugarman.*



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[www.teamwestport.org](http://www.teamwestport.org)